

Preface: Is Postcolonial Art Contemporary?

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In a number of discursive spaces, but perhaps most especially in artworld discourse, the idea of the “contemporary” (as the reflexive name for a state of *time* or a state of *being*) has gained considerable traction.¹ Beyond the familiar busyness of academic theory, this speculative concept-making is part of an important and provocative attempt to give the question of the *present*—the time we live in—some critical specificity with respect to temporal notions of pastness (what is no more) as well as futurity (what is not yet). There are many thinkers whose work might provoke us here, but in this very brief note the author whose work will frame my discussion is the prolific art critic Terry Smith, who is now almost never not writing about, or explicating, the contemporary.² For him, the contemporary in art is the name of a diverse set of responses to large, historical transformations in the global world we all—if differently—coinhabit. Part of what interests me about Smith is that in figuring the contemporary he has sought to incorporate reflections on the question of visual work being produced in the former colonial world. Indeed, for Smith the *postcolonial* is even one of the characteristic *dimensions* of the contemporary in global art. He incites us, therefore, to ask, What is the relation between the “contemporary” and the “postcolonial”? Is postcolonial art contemporary?

Smith writes of an epochal shift from the modern to the contemporary (via the postmodern) in global art. Globally, he argues, art today is above all contemporary. What does he mean by this? What is *contemporary* (as opposed to modern) about contemporary art? What is the story about

1 See Hal Foster et al., “Questionnaire on ‘The Contemporary,’” *October*, no. 130 (Fall 2009): 3–124.

2 There are many works of Smith’s that one might think with, but for my purposes here my focus is on his survey book *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (London: Prentice Hall, 2011).

modernism that it depends on for the contrast it stakes out? And how does the colonial and post-colonial figure in this story of global art? Finally, is there a sense in which this alleged historic shift is, in the end, primarily a story about Europe and the United States (or anyway a story primarily *from* their perspectives), the great centers of the hegemonic story of global art? Or, even if this is largely so, is this a distinction that has (or *can* have) some resonances with how we might think about art-making in the global South? *This* ultimately is what interests me here: how to write histories of art from the former colonial world. Thinking through Jamaica, in a tentative and exploratory way, I am going to suggest that there is indeed something profound going on in visual art today that is not reducible to the categories of modern and modernism as these have been conventionally deployed in art-historical discourse.

The story Smith tells is about the rise and fall of the discursive and institutional hegemony of the artistic sensibility that was part and parcel of the making of the modern world. And in particular, it is the story of the passing of the high point of that sensibility, namely, modernism, that came by the middle of the twentieth century to authorize which objects, styles, forms, and practices counted as art, which critical and commercial values to attach to them, and which venues (galleries, museums, exhibitions, publications) legitimized their visibility. On Smith's account, in the latter half of the twentieth century, as a consequence of the world-remaking processes of globalization, decolonization, and transnationalism, this whole edifice was thrown into irretrievable question. Modern art has become conformist, modernism another name for cultural normativity. Today, Smith argues, what characterizes the production and distribution of art is a more *horizontal* sensibility marked by proliferation and diversity: "Contemporary art is—perhaps for the first time in history—truly an art of the world. It comes *from* the whole world, and frequently tries to imagine the world as a *differentiated yet inevitably connected whole*." This work, says Smith, is contemporary inasmuch as it is "a vital part of our immediate experience of the present."³ He acknowledges that something similar could be said about modern art when it was emerging as a critical response to the social and cultural forces reshaping the world that came to be called modern. But, he insists, today's art is contemporary in a novel way, it is "contemporary in and of itself, and in ways more fundamental than those in which previous art has been contemporary": "Contemporary art is no longer one kind of art, nor does it have a limited set of shared qualities somewhat distinct from those of the art of past periods in the history of art yet fundamentally continuous with them. It does not presume inevitable historical development; it has no expectation that present confusion will eventually cohere into a style representative of this historical moment. Such art is multiple, internally differentiating, category-shifting, shape-changing, unpredictable (that is, diverse)—like contemporaneity itself."⁴

What Smith thinks of as the "postcolonial turn" within the contemporary is one dimension of this overall process. The collapse of the colonial as part of the collapse of the modern and the restructuring of the post-Cold War global order has created unprecedented conditions for the production, circulation, and reception of art from the former colonial world. This is partly true. But I

3 Terry Smith, "Contemporary Art in Transition: From Late Modern Art to Now," general introduction to *ibid.*, 8 (italics in original).

4 *Ibid.*, 9.

wonder whether there isn't something too *presentist* in Smith's account in the sense that it depends on the radical novelty of the present ("for the first time in history," "truly an art of the world," and so on). Does this sense of the novelty of the experience of the present partly depend on a political economy of geopolitical location along old axes of global privilege? Certainly, there is an aspirational tone to the perspective of Smith's narrative that may ring less concretely true depending on the specific postcolonial histories it is imagined through. We may all be contemporaries, as he says, but are we *equally* contemporary? Aren't some contemporaries *more* contemporary than others in their access to the experience—and goods—of transnational globality?

Notably, in Smith's survey, my part of the Caribbean falls within the section called "Elsewhere in the Caribbean"—that is, elsewhere *besides* Cuba. Now, all surveys perhaps have to play this game, but it raises the question of how to think his suggestive typology in relation to the visual work that concerns me here. For example, is the art-historical story of "Jamaican art" helpfully told as a story of the displacement of the modern by the contemporary? The answer is not so straightforward. Certainly, the very idea of "Jamaican art" properly belongs to a modern, specifically nationalist, narrative. As is well known, the story of Jamaican art as the development of a modern "art movement" is told authoritatively by the influential artist, curator, and art historian David Boxer.⁵ In this narrative the Jamaican art movement is seen as an expressive response to a larger, modernizing cultural-political movement of national awakening, decolonization, and sovereignty. This is a story with a progressive rhythm and congratulatory tone marked by a number of now-familiar episodes: the portentous arrival in Jamaica in 1922 of Edna Manley and the beginnings of a self-consciously modern visual language; the appreciative recognition and incorporation *by the moderns* in the early years of self-determination of untutored artists, the Intuitives, John Dunkley being the first of them; and the maturation of the modern movement in the wake of political independence in the avant-garde modernism of foreign-trained artists Barrington Watson, Eugene Hyde, and Karl Parboosingh. Now, understandably, in this story Boxer does not include himself, but arguably, both in his own relentlessly experimental artistic practice from the late 1970s (with installation and collage, among other forms) and as the inaugural and long-serving director and chief curator of the National Gallery of Jamaica, he may be said to *embody* the contentious *realization* of a Jamaican art movement. In this sense, therefore, the modern in Jamaican art is indeed tied not only to an enabling formation of expressive styles derived in part from European and US traditions and applied to Jamaican material but also to a postcolonial structure of authorizing and legitimizing powers that are part of the disseminating imperatives regarding "art and national development," definitively propounded by modernist-nationalist intellectuals like Rex Nettleford.⁶ It is hardly surprising that at the same time, running counter to the exclusive tastes of this developmentalist art movement idea, the work of artists like Omari Ra and K. Khalfani Ra from the 1980s onward suggested a subaltern narrative

5 See David Boxer, *Jamaican Art, 1922–1982*, exhibition catalogue (Washington: SITES and National Gallery of Jamaica, 1982).

6 Think of Rex Nettleford's "The Cultural Dimension of Development" in his *Caribbean Cultural Identity: The Case of Jamaica* (Kingston: Institute of Jamaica, 1978), 83–146.

of Rastafari-inflected cultural nationalism that gave voice and vision to an alternative idea of the national-modern project.

But does this idea of an art movement retain any generative possibility today? It would be hard to deny that in Jamaica and its diasporas there has been not only a remarkable explosion of visual work but a generational shift away from reliance on the old categories of modern art as well as on the old networks of art exhibitions and art marketing.⁷ Who would say that artists as contrasting as Nicholas Morris, Charles Campbell, and Roberta Stoddart in the 1990s belonged to anything like an art movement? And all the more so with artists born largely from about 1980 onward who have sought to inherit a different 1960s and 1970s than the hegemonic nationalist-modernist one of an older generation, people such as Ebony Patterson, Leasho Johnson, Cosmo Whyte, Deborah Anzinger, Phillip Thomas, Oneika Russell, and Camille Chedda. These are artists, certainly, whose work is contemporary in the sense that it responds, disruptively and revealingly, to (or through) a Jamaican present in category-shifting ways. And yet it is also true that they are not entirely unconstrained by the old (and new) global powers of authorization, definition, evaluation, funding, and access that have historically structured the modern colonial and postcolonial Caribbean world.

Many of these are artists whose work has appeared in the pages of *Small Axe*. So, should we describe the time of the Small Axe Project as that of the contemporary? We've not had a hard art-critical or thematic agenda. We've worked only with a growing apprehension that something *is* going on in visual work today that is not reducible to the old art-historical categories. Our itinerary has been entirely provisional and exploratory, looking to find ways of responding to the extraordinary degree to which a younger generation of artists are involved in thinking—and thinking *through*—their own Caribbean present and doing so in provocative and dissenting ways. In the projects that we've initiated, with increasing complexity of conception, design, and ambition (“Caribbean Visual Memory,” “The Visual Life of Catastrophic History,” “Caribbean Queer Visualities,” and “The Visual Life of Social Affliction”), our intuition has been that visual work *thinks*, thinks its own time, thinks its own time not merely contemplatively but dissentingly, and in these senses incites an intelligibility *of* and *for* the world they—and we—live in. What has struck us about the work being done by the Caribbean artists we've been involved with is the way that, without sacrificing a pronounced attention to an *aesthetic*, the work has refused to become trapped in any modernist or avant-garde conceit of opacity or wonderment and has insisted openly that visual practice can also respond with reflective immediacy to the exigences of the conflicted worlds that shape our collective experience. Are these signs of a Caribbean *contemporary*? In any case, this is visual work to which the Small Axe Project remains committed.

Kingston–New York

November–December 2019

⁷ See Veerle Poupeye, “Contemporary Jamaican Art,” in David Boxer and Veerle Poupeye, *Modern Jamaican Art* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1998), 37.